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ABSTRACT

This paper provides the course design and content for a course on the psychology of aging intended to reach practitioners and undergraduate students who live in isolated areas and are unable to attend congregate classes. Four educational objectives include: (1) to increase the knowledge and understanding of the student in the processes and psychological changes associated with aging; (2) to sensitize the student to an empathic position of the aged; (3) to arouse the students' interest in the study of aging; (4) to prepare the student to work with the aged considering psychological theories, personality and functional changes involved in the aging process. The course is designed to provide the student with experiential situations and continual feedback through written assignments in a two-way interaction with the instructor. There are 12 lessons assigned. Evaluation is based on open book mid-term, and final exams and a project. A pre- and post-attitude scale will assist in evaluating the effectiveness of the course. (Author)

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TEACHING IN THE BOONDOCKS:

A MODEL FOR INDEPENDENT STUDY OF THE PSYCHOLOGY OF AGING

by

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Efforts to reach practitioners in isolated or rural areas are currently receiving national attention. Adult education, life-long learning and continuing education programs encourage people to remain involved in the learning process throughout the life span.

Many people working with older adults are interested in continuing to upgrade their own knowledge and skills. Some are encouraged through job incentives such as courses paid for by employers or the government, pay raises upon demonstrated successful completion of courses, and a desire to complete certificate or degree requirements.

The student living in isolated areas suffers from the lack of courses and/or time from job to attend regularly scheduled classes when they are available.

Historically, independent study has been through "correspondence courses," but the number of students completing such courses has been very low, the major reason being that personal interaction and adequate feedback are lacking.

The course I designed for independent study in the Psychology of Aging for the University of Oregon attempted to specifically deal with these problem areas. Each of the twelve lessons include a short assignment involving sharing and interaction between the instructor and the student.

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Lesson content is relatively traditional and deals with such topics as a review of research methods, demographic data, longevity, sexuality, psychological theories of aging, personality, intelligence, learning, motivation, memory, sensory changes, etc.

The unique element in this course is that it is designed to provide the student with viable feedback to encourage her/him to complete the course resulting in a positive learning experience.

Assignments are related to the lessons. Some examples follow:

Lesson Two (Chapters 1 & 2)

Demographic data--Who Are the Aged--The Number of Older People--Issuesof Housing--Health--Income--Biological and Environmental Factors.

Assignment--Write a short report on the aged in your county. How many persons are there over 65, where do they live, what is the average income, etc. This information is available at a library, county census report, and through some social service agencies.

Lesson Three (Chapter 3)

Psychological and Social Factors in Longevity and Survival--Psychological Factors--Social Factors

Assignment--Visit a nursing home and interview a patient. Write a report about the adjustment, attitudes and physical situation of the person you talked to; include your personal observations about how effectively the personal needs of the individual are being met. Relate your report to the material in Chapter 3.

Lesson Four (Chapter 4)

Sexuality and Sexual relations--The myth of sexlessness in the aged--sexual waning--factors in fulfillment--sensuality and sexuality.

Assignment--Read one or more outside articles or books relating to sexuality and middle-age or aging. Write a short comparison of that material and relate it to information in the text. Some suggested readings are included in the bibliography.

In addition, exercise sheets to fill in are included for some lessons such as dimensions of aging, learning ability in aging and sensory changes in aging.

One experiential assignment was utilized relating to sensory deprivation. The instructions are: spend one entire day with a stocking over your non-dominant hand and arm. Write and submit a report on your experiences, including the physical difficulties you encounter by loss of the use of a limb -- your feelings, how other people react to you, and your insight into sensory deprivation.

Evaluation of the student is based on open-book examinations, assignments and a project. The mid-term is objective and includes multiple choice of 15 items and 10 items of true-false covering material through lesson six. The final examination, also open-book, is a short answer essay format of ten questions valued at ten points each.

Examinations comprise 60% of the grade; assignments 20%, and the project 20%.

Several projects were suggested allowing for.variability of student interest and talent. The scope of the project also allows for additional work for graduate credit. Projects are negotiated between instructor and student. Some of the suggested projects include:

A. Write a biography of an older person who is not a relative and who you have interviewed over a series of at least five separate meetings. (10-20 pages)

B. Visit a program for the older adult in your community and write an evaluation of the program's goals and how effectively the psychological, social and physiological needs of the participants are being met. Include recommendations for improvement.

C. Evaluate the overall service delivery system in your county (Area Agency on Aging) and write a report as outlined in option B, above.

D. Do a research paper on one specific area of the psychology of aging.

E. Keep a scrapbook with all of the articles on aging that you find in newspapers, magazines and other printed form.

F. Illustrate issues in the psychology of aging through art, music, poster form, tape or other audio-visual materials that could be used for a public presentation to educate a group.

G. Any other creative project approved by your instructor.

One additional dimension included in this course is a pre- and post-testing of attitudes toward the aged. I used the Kogan scale which allows the instructor to evaluate his/her own effectiveness as well as the Division of Continuing Education to determine whether this format is a

useful learning experience. A course evaluation is also included and feedback from the student should be encouraged. Communication requires two-way interaction.

In planning and implementing such courses, instructors should be prepared to respond promptly to all written correspondence from students and to use the variety of communication systems available, including the telephone and telegraph as well as the mail. A personal meeting would also enhance the learning experience and interaction, if at all possible at least one such meeting should be arranged at some time during the duration of the course.

Last, but perhaps of primary importance, the initial planning of such a course should include clear educational objectives. These objectives provide a road-map of from where to where the instructor expects the student to travel. The ones I wrote for this course are:

A. To increase the knowledge and understanding of the student in the process and psychological changes associated with aging.

B. To sensitize the student toward an empathic position of the aged.

C. To arouse the students' interest in the study of aging.

D. To prepare the student to work with the aged.

The course is approved for undergraduate and graduate credit and is recognized as a completed requirement for a certificate in gerontology through the University of Oregon, Center on Gerontology.

The innovative approach of this model is for the student to learn the theoretical material and to use it in applied form. While the student work assignments are relatively heavy the underlying philosophy is to encourage trust and open-ness between instructor and student and, in such a milieu facilitate a positive learning experience in spite of the physical separation between teacher and learner.